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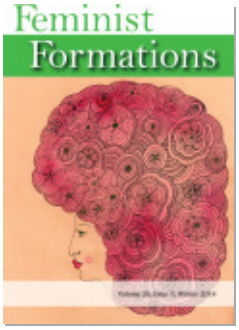

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The Dawn of a New Lilith: Revisionary Mythmaking in Women's Science Fiction

MICHELE OSHEROW

Women writers of science fiction have found a venue for female characters who not only defy mythic conventions, but also refashion them. In C.L. Moore's "Fruit of Knowledge" and Octavia E. Butler's Dawn *we witness a careful revisioning of the myth of Lilith. Within these women's fictions, Lilith does more than threaten male protagonists; she evolves into a complex hero belying the stereotypes that typically restrict female characters. Vacillating between the images of wicked temptress and fond mother, the Lilith emerging from women's science fiction presents a new feminine image, one reflecting a diversification of women's roles in contemporary culture. In this essay, I investigate the myth of Lilith as it is revisioned in women's science fiction. My purpose is three-fold: 1) to examine traces of Lilith that have been present in science fiction, and make this genre a ready site for a revisionist Lilith myth; 2) to point to the ways Moore and Butler manipulate, challenge, and recreate the myth of Lilith in their fictions; and 3) to probe the cultural consequences of these new myths. In the science fiction genre, the revisioned Lilith reflects the myths and experiences of alien minorities, namely, Jewish and African American women.*

In "Why Women Can't Write," Joanna Russ offers science fiction as a liberating genre for women, one that welcomes the display of alternative attitudes and cultures (1972, 18). According to Russ, the science fiction (S/F) arena is particularly appropriate for introducing figures that challenge traditional literary representations of women. Indeed, women writers of science fiction have found a venue for female characters who not only defy mythic conventions but also refashion them. The challenge to female stereotypes within this genre extends to one of the oldest mythic females, Lilith, the apocryphal first wife of Adam. She is a night demon, the original "Bitch Goddess."[1] In C.L. Moore's "Fruit of Knowledge" and Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn* we witness a careful revisioning of the myth of Lilith. Lilith does more than threaten male protagonists in these fictions; she evolves into a complex hero belying the stereotypes that typically restrict female characters. Vacillating between the images of wicked temptress and fond mother, the Lilith emerging from women's science fiction presents a new feminine image, one reflecting a diversification of women's roles in contemporary culture.

Revisions of the myth of Lilith span our literary cosmos.[2] New versions

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of her tale surface everywhere from feminist revisions of the Bible, to environmental musicals, to the genre I focus on here: women's science fiction. The S/F genre is fertile ground for a blossoming Lilith; as Russ notes, some of science fiction's "most fascinating characters . . . are not human" (1972, 18). Mythical representation of Lilith presents her as a powerful and decidedly inhuman force. Nonetheless, feminist S/F revisions present Lilith as both earthly and enigmatic without losing sight of her undeniable power. Revisions of Lilith's legend demonstrate Hélene Cixous and Catherine Clément's assertion that "myth transmits itself making changes in accordance with . . . cultural evolution" (1986, 6). The changes made to Lilith reflect evolving attitudes toward women's place within a patriarchal culture. No longer content to define female characters exclusively through relation to male heroes (Russ 1972, 5), women writers produce female champions who reject the "good girl/bad girl" binary in which "good" symbolizes women's service to the patriarchy, and "bad" announces them a threat to patriarchy. The revisioned Lilith as she appears in women's S/F stories complicates the stereotypes of both the empowered sorceress and the idealized mother. Her character demonstrates the difficulties of reckoning an independent, sexual self with a being on whom innocents depend for sustenance and protection.

Because mythmaking is a cultural phenomenon, my investigation relies on the work of literary theorists, psychologists, theologians, and feminists to more fully appreciate the revisioning methodology at work. My purpose is three-fold: 1) to examine traces of Lilith that have been present in science fiction, and make this genre a ready site for a revisionist Lilith myth; 2) to point to the ways Moore and Butler manipulate, challenge, and recreate the myth of Lilith in their fictions; and 3) to probe the cultural consequences of these new myths. While Moore's portrayal of Lilith champions female empowerment and asserts the necessity of emboldened female characters, Butler's depiction of the mythical figure refines modern notions of womanhood and motherhood. Also evident in Butler's characterization is her reliance on African American women's history to represent the experiences of an oppressed alien.

Meeting Lilith

To appreciate a new vision of Lilith, we must acquaint ourselves with the old. The myth of Lilith comes from a rabbinic *midrash*, a kind of literature devoted to biblical interpretation. Lilith's tale results from the ancient rabbis' attempts to explain the discrepancies between Genesis chapter one, in which we are told: "And God created the human species in his own image . . . male and female he created them" (v. 27), and Genesis

chapter two, which recounts Eve's creation out of a rib from Adam's side (v. 21). The following midrash featuring Lilith is attributed to Ben Sira, and dates from approximately 1000 C.E.:

> After the Holy One created the first human being, Adam, He said: "It is not good for Adam to be alone." He created a woman, also from the earth, and called her Lilith. They quarreled immediately. She said: "I will not lie below you." He said, "I will not lie below you, but above you. For you are fit to be below me." She responded: "We are both equal because we both come from the earth." Neither listened to the other. When Lilith realized what was happening, she pronounced the Ineffable name of God and flew off into the air.
>
> Adam rose in prayer before the Creator, saying, "The woman you gave me has fled from me." Immediately the Holy One sent three angels after her. The Holy One said to Adam: "If she wants to return, all the better. If not, she will have to accept that one hundred of her children will die every day." The angels went after her, finally locating her in the sea. . . . They told her what God had said, and she did not want to return. (Cantor 1983, 40)[3]

According to Jewish legend then, the first woman was named Lilith. She was created with Adam, and considered herself his equal. Adam disagreed. Lilith, valuing independence above male companionship, flew away from Adam and Eden. Legend tells us that she subsequently joined forces with Satan and gave birth to armies of devil children (Koltuv 1986, 20). Her punishment for abandoning her first mate is that one hundred of her children will die each day (Ginzberg 1967, I:65).

Jewish tradition characterizes Lilith as a devil, one eager to attack small children and pregnant women. Amulets warding off Lilith were traditionally hung by the beds of women giving birth.[4] Regardless of such precaution, there exists legend upon legend of Lilith's vengeful activities committed in retaliation for the deaths of her own demonic young. As Aviva Cantor writes, "The demonic Lilith overshadowed the original independent Lilith in all subsequent legends to the point where her name engendered only the association of demon and witch" (1983, 41). Biblical translations evidence her increasing association with evil. The only biblical reference to Lilith is found in Isaiah 34:14: "The wild creatures of the desert also meet with the jackals, the screech owl shall cry to his fellow." "Lilith" has traditionally been translated as "screech owl," "night monster," or "night hag." The Hebrew Bible published by the Jewish Publication Society began identifying the monster simply as "the lilith" in 1985. Apparently, her name is enough to connote fear and evil.

Lilith is depicted as an enemy of both women and men. In addition to killing pregnant women and their babes, she is a succubus responsible for men's nocturnal emissions, stealing their seed in order to populate the world with demons (Ostriker 1993, 99). Cantor writes that Lilith's crimes "embody several crucial male fears" including impotence, loss of a female companion, and loss of the patriarchal line (1983, 45–6).

Lilith may seem familiar to those who have never read midrashim or the Old Testament in its original Hebrew. Her figure pervades Western culture; she is the original femme fatale, the insatiable seductress. Lilith, the first woman, the first Bad Girl. Lilith appears as a subject in classical literature by such authors as Robert Browning, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and C.S. Lewis, and more recently in the work of Pamela Hadas and Alicia Ostriker. Even unwittingly perhaps, writers refer to her in surprisingly specific ways. In *Satanism and Witchcraft*, Jules Michelet describes a peasant wife turned sorceress as a "wretched screech owl" (1939, 53).[5] In *The Newly Born Woman*, Cixous and Clément examine a number of mythical female figures labeling them either "sorceress" or "hysteric" (1986, 5). While they do not mention Lilith by name, these critics recognize the frequent characterization of woman as demon, and our culture's need to destroy her. They further locate the sorceress as the bearer of the past, and hence a figure invested with a "challenging power" (1986, 9).

Lilith's history and the power accompanying it have been acknowledged most thoroughly by Jewish feminists. Beginning in the latter half of this century, and particularly in the 1970s, these women resurrected Lilith as a symbol of their movement. They focused on her independence and courage, and continue to call upon feminists to reexamine and reevaluate her story. Cantor encourages us to see Lilith's experience as the struggle for equality between the sexes (1983, 50); Barbara Black Koltuv uses Lilith to exemplify "the freedom to move, act, choose, and determine" (1986, 22). One place women find such freedom is in the pages of women's science fiction.

That Lilith should appear in science fiction is not at all surprising. In a genre in which women generally take the form of the alien other, Lilith is right at home: she's immortal, powerful, strong, feared, sexual, and midrash even tells us she can fly. It is perhaps ironic that stories associated with the future should so heavily feature reproductions of an ancient female. However, if we look past that irony we discover what feminist literary critics have recognized for some time: that stories of powerful women do exist, but they are always a retelling of the same story about the same evil woman whose destruction brings victory to a male hero. We know from those colorful sci-fi pulps of the 1940s and 1950s that female aliens are potent and worthy opponents for male protagonists, but they must in the end be defeated.

Pulp Lilith

In her study *A New Species: Gender and Science in Science Fiction*, Robin Roberts examines pulp science fiction as a forerunner to contemporary feminist science fiction. She observes that "though pulp science

fiction itself at first seems an inhospitable place for feminist ideas, the patterns of science fiction provide women writers with the opportunity for radical revision and reclamation" (1993, 40). In presenting her case for the protofeminism of the pulps, Roberts relies chiefly upon the female S/F characters created by male writers. She explains, "male science fiction writers did exclude human women from their texts, but they represented the feminine through the female alien" (1993, 62). Roberts describes these dangerous feminine others as beings who "mesmerize men through their sexual allure" (1993, 41). Such aliens bear a striking resemblance to Lilith, and the similarities have not gone unnoticed by female S/F writers themselves. Leigh Brackett, for example, in her 1952 story "The Starmen," describes the evil female alien as "no more human than Lilith" (1952, 12). Thirty years later, a volume of *Pulpsmith* is dedicated to Lilith. The title page announces, "LILITH LIVES!!!," and asks, "Why does [Lilith] wax stronger as the Space Age opens?" (1982, 1). It is perhaps because the evil attributed to Lilith is now identified as mankind's fear of potent women. In *Pulpsmith's* printed excerpt from *The Book of Lilith*, we find a Lilith in psychotherapy. When asked "'When did you first notice / the feeling that men reject you?'," Lilith answers, "it was the moment they saw I had power" (Skeen and Closson 1982, 47). Though readers of pulp and science fiction may note a recent fascination with this legendary she-devil, Lilith has been haunting such tales for over 50 years, beginning with C.L. Moore's story "Fruit of Knowledge."

First published in 1940, Moore's tale features Lilith as the first female, but the writer embellishes on tradition. Here, Lilith's existence actually precedes Adam's; she is "The Queen of Air and Darkness" who takes the human form only when she gets wind of Adam's fantasies.[6] True to legend, once in the flesh Moore's Lilith is a sexual, sensual being, and she is, decidedly, not a good girl; Lilith was "evil incarnate and knew it very well" (Moore 1975, 175). As the story progresses, we see Moore's Lilith develop passions both for men and for revenge. This is a story about Lilith's jealousy of Eve (who takes her place next to Adam), and what she does about it.

Moore clearly wants her audience to identify with Lilith whether she is Queen of Darkness or not. She wants us to feel and enjoy Lilith's power, how fearful the angels are in her presence, how titillating it is to rest her head on Adam's perfect shoulder. Eve is the ineffectual coy maiden; she wins Adam over with her blue eyes, blonde hair, and helplessness. Moore's Eve appears childish and rather silly: "Eve on a rock was splashing her small feet and flashing blue-eyed glances over her shoulder. . . . 'Adam!' squealed Eve. . . . Catch me! Quick! . . . Catch me!'" (Moore 1975, 183).[7] When Lilith entreats Lucifer to get Eve to eat from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, we don't really blame her. But only Eve is the target; Lilith makes Lucifer promise not to harm the man: "I saw him first. . . I want

him" (Moore 1975, 187). As free-spirited and resourceful as this dark Queen is, she is not however, an ally to womankind. Given the repercussions of Eve's punishment, it is difficult to consider Lilith a friend to anyone. But some feminists argue that she is not meant to be; Lilith's purpose is to emphasize power, action, and choice, not affection. Lilith, Cantor tells us, is the shadow—the flip side—of Eve. While Eve supports the patriarchy, boosting Adam's manhood through her submission, Lilith threatens that patriarchy with her autonomy (Cantor 1983, 45).

Though Moore may appear to treat Lilith as the traditional antithesis of Eve,[8] her interpretation and revision of this tale is evident and important. Moore makes it abundantly clear that Lilith is not human, but superhuman and, hence, more mighty than Adam. Lilith willingly takes a human form but is decidedly more comfortable (and more potent) when not confined to flesh:

> . . .without thinking, almost without realizing what she did, she sprang up and out of the flesh that was betraying her. Up, up through the crystal morning she sprang, impalpable as the air around her. . . . She was free . . . of the flesh and the terrifying weakness that had gone with it. (Moore 1975, 179)

Lilith's powers exceed those of man. Though she delights in Adam's human shape, the human body is a thing foreign to her. Hence, Moore restricts Lilith to the role of alien, but she also uses that distance to heighten Lilith's prestige. Moore emphasizes the importance of Lilith's function in divine order:

> She realized well the essence of abstract evil as opposed to abstract good—balancing it, making it possible. Her part was necessary as God's in the scheme of creation, for light cannot exist without dark, nor positive without negative, nor good without evil. (1975, 176)

Lilith's part in Eden is presented as no less vital than that of the creator. "I have secrets of my own," she tells us, "and power not even God can control" (Moore 1975, 188). The potent female of Moore's story is beyond our mortal realm. She is a worthy opponent for God himself, and Moore depicts their conflict as direct combat: "before the war was over in heaven, war began in Eden between Lilith and God" (1975, 177).

Lilith's divine conflict stems from her fondness for a divine creation. Her interest in Adam, and subsequent jealousy of the "pale usurper" (Moore 1975, 183),[9] inspires her to engage in the human realm. This engagement consequently invites comparison between the women who surface in Eden. Eve is golden (Moore 1975, 181); Lilith (in human form) is dark, and surrounded by a curious shadow (Moore 1975, 169). Moore offers a polarity of sorts between the two female creatures, but this polarity, while itself traditional, is approached in an untraditional manner. In Moore's story, Lilith is powerful, intelligent, independent, and deter-

mined. Eve is shallow in her understanding, dependent upon Adam, and rather shrewish. She defensively justifies her taste for forbidden fruit by telling Adam, "It's good. Better than anything *you* ever gave me" (Moore 1975, 193). Lilith may be representative of evil, but Eve is not representative of good. Instead, the differences between the two fall along the lines of intelligence versus ignorance, desire versus ambivalence.

Though Lilith and Eve as Moore presents them to us have little in common, we do find characteristics in Moore's Lilith that are traditionally attributed to Eve. Lilith is devoted to Adam (and incorrectly assumes his devotion will mirror hers); evidence of her loyalty appears in her obsessive instructions to Lucifer to leave Adam unharmed. In addition, Lilith's exchanges with both Adam and Lucifer are forms of partnerships. Her human presence is the result of Adam's desires, which she reciprocates with desires of her own. Lilith's negotiations with Lucifer find them plotting their destructive course together; each counsels the other in combative strategy. Though Eve frequently calls out for Adam and nuzzles against him, she does not confide in him (Moore 1975, 189).

Moore's revision begins to reckon the historically polar identities of Lilith and Eve. Moore's characterization of the Queen of Air and Darkness indicates an emerging awareness of the complexities of Lilith's history. This revisionist work moves Lilith into a place where she may be viewed as vital, powerful, and sacred. Lilith remains active at the end of Moore's story, present in all her awesome mystery. This presence is significant; according to Roberts, "controlling the female alien is a way of controlling the abject, the unknown, the terrifying" (1993, 46).

Moore's Lilith is unknown and potentially terrifying, but she is not, in the end, controlled by any human hero. Unlike her fellow pulp sci-fi aliens, Lilith does not sacrifice herself for male survival. By preserving Lilith as a threatening character, Moore fortifies the role of the female alien. In science fiction writings by men, the female alien would normally be "put in her proper place, subordinate to the male characters" (Roberts 1993, 62). But Moore does not allow this. At the end of the story, while the serpent eats dust and Adam and Eve toil for their bread, Lilith flies freely through the air, only now she carries the burden of desire: "So long as he was alive she knew now she would never be free of it; this weakness would torment her still for the flesh that had once been Adam" (Moore 1975, 195). Important, too, is that Lilith's punishment is not inflicted upon her as are the punishments of the others who disrupt Eden. Lilith does entreat God for a punishment, but he replies, "Make your own choice, Queen of Air and Darkness" (Moore 1975, 198). Thus, Lilith chooses her burden.

Lilith: In Light Of Dawn

While Moore moves Lilith into a position of sustained power in her pulp story, African American science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler complicates and confuses that power in her 1987 novel *Dawn*, the first novel of Butler's Xenogenesis Trilogy. Butler's new Lilith is the African American heroine of this novel. Like Moore, Butler positions her Lilith to win our sympathies and identification, frequently enhancing the demonic namesake with the characteristics of other female icons. Butler's revisionist mythmaking combines elements of history and legend, culminating in a celebration of a hitherto feared and ephemeral female figure.

Though Butler does not set her tale in Eden or surround Lilith with the usual ensemble of Adam, Eve, and Lucifer, Butler's Lilith Iyapo resembles the legendary she-devil with amazing precision. She resists tyranny, is independent, bold, and curious. Moreover, she has special powers, as Lilith is thought to have had (since she knew God's "ineffable name"). Lilith Iyapo's experiences mirror those of the original Lilith to a great extent as well. Her first confrontation with a male human in the novel finds her in danger of being raped; similarly many scholars read Lilith's refusal to "lie below" Adam for its sexual implications.[10] This new Lilith, like her predecessor, is also the incubator for a type of devil's spawn. Upon learning that her DNA will be used for an alien gene trade, Lilith Iyapo envisions her offspring as "Medusa children. Snakes for hair. Nests of night crawlers for eyes and ears" (Butler 1987, 43). When she becomes pregnant Lilith says, "But they won't be human . . . it will be a thing. A monster" (Butler 1987, 262). At the novel's end we also learn that this Lilith, like her mythic ancestor, is sentenced to perpetual exile from her home. Lilith appears suspicious to other characters throughout the novel. She is painfully mistrusted by the majority of people she awakens from "deep sleep" and is particularly threatening to men. She attributes one man's hostile behavior to a belief that "his manhood was taken away" (Butler 1987, 203). Her powers exceed those of the others; one woman even asks if Lilith is "really human" (Butler 1987, 190).

This surfacing apprehension about Lilith's human and alien qualities is an essential part of Butler's novel and marks Lilith's establishment in both a human and alien realm. When we meet Butler's Lilith, she is the only human in the novel. The other characters consist mostly of alien creatures called Oankali. They have worm-like eyes and are covered with small maggot-type sensory preceptors. Though we are told that Lilith is human, we realize, too, that she is a human minority among an alien majority; hence she becomes the alien in the world of the Oankali. Lilith recognizes the tenuousness of her position, and refers to herself as "the alien, the uncomprehending outsider" (Butler 1987, 111). In the Oankali

social order, Lilith's alienation comes from her lack of authority, a situation akin to that of women in a masculine culture. As noted, however, aliens are awarded a kind of power in science fiction, and such is the case with Lilith Iyapo. The Oankali need Lilith in order to reproduce (these creatures are genetically wired to cross-breed with other species). Consequently, Lilith's presence is vital, and she is given various privileges; for example, the Oankali chemically increase her mental and physical capacities. But the price of Lilith's empowerment is her estrangement, for when she is permitted to interact with humans she has been altered to so great an extent that her fellow earthlings do not recognize her as an ally: "They could not trust one of their own who seemed too close to the aliens" (Butler 1987, 253). Lilith is the "alien other" to all those with whom she comes in contact.

As Butler's Lilith both is and is not human, so she is and is not like the ancient Lilith. While particulars of her story duplicate those of the original Lilith, Butler's Lilith is also quite different from the Liliths we meet in legend, or in science fiction tales. The mythical Lilith is typically regarded as the antithesis of Eve (Cantor 1983, 45). Butler's Lilith, however, is significantly "Eve-like," much more so than Moore's character. In her discussion of Lilith as the dark side of Eve, Cantor describes Eve as the great "enabler" (1983, 45). Such women are the epitome of altruism, Cantor writes, sacrificing themselves in the interest of others (1983, 45). Interestingly, Butler's Lilith "enables" all those with whom she comes in contact. She is essential to the Oankalis' survival: "We . . . do need you," an Oankali tells Lilith, and, alluding to the ancient myth, describes her as "horror and beauty in rare combination" (Butler 1987, 161). Lilith serves to enable humans, too. In their mock-earth habitat, Lilith confronts her fellow humans with their dependence upon her: "You thought I might be useful! You thought you'd eat better and be better able to survive out here. You didn't think you were doing me a favor, you thought you were doing yourself one" (Butler 1987, 229).

Lilith's position as enabler was thrust upon her by her captors. They set her up as parent to the other humans, and by so doing force a most striking contrast to the Lilith of old. This Lilith actually assumes Eve's function as the mother of all. She embodies the most significant traits of Lilith and Eve. Motherhood is an unusual concentration for Lilith. In Moore's tale, when Adam first sees Lilith and shares his plan to call her "Eve, Mother of All Living," she answers, "It's a good name, but not for me" (1975, 174). Lilith has never been the maternal type, but Butler's Lilith has few options. This Lilith assumes the mother role, though with reluctance and antipathy: "You're going to set me up as their mother? . . . [P]ut me back to sleep, dammit. . . . I never wanted this job!" (Butler 1987, 116–17).

In Butler's story, Lilith is not able to deny her reproductive strength. Her survival depends upon compliance, for it is through her biological

potential for motherhood that Lilith maintains her place within the Oankali order. This is often the case with female aliens in science fiction. In this genre, particularly as it is reinscribed by women, the role of Mother is essential, representing the importance of a nurturing, life-giving force. However, while writers of women's utopian and science fiction frequently valorize motherhood, there remains an expressed anxiety about that state. Female characters acknowledge the necessity of procreation, but we can also find examples of those who resent the imposition of reproduction. These same women are frequently very independent, sexual, and threatening.[11]

The dichotomy present in depictions of women as *either* maternal *or* sexual reflects a larger anxiety toward women within our cultural heritage. As Nancy Chodorow explains in *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities*, maternal power is characterized by "reliability, nurturance and the capacity for comfort" (1994, 59). She further adds that the mother tends not to be portrayed "psychologically or . . . culturally as a sex object. . . . [H]er sexual power is . . . denied" (1994, 59). The revision of a myth that perpetuates such a representation of motherhood may also refigure our psychological perception of women and maternity. Butler's Lilith challenges how we define and consider our female social selves. Lilith Iyapo is sexual and powerful; she is also maternal.

Butler's heroine reflects a cultural anxiety about motherhood that, according to Susan Contratto, has been surfacing in our culture for the past 50 years (1983, 169). In her article "Psychology Views Mothers and Mothering: 1897–1980," Contratto observes that women "have been more at odds with familial responsibilities and have rebelled against them" (1983, 169). *Dawn* presents this rebellion in action. Butler's Lilith is ambivalent about her brood, both the adult humans she awakens and the fetus she carries. It is difficult to idealize a mother such as Lilith, and that lack of potential classifies her as an unacceptable mother in Freudian terms. Contratto and Chodorow argue that our culture preserves the fantasy of "the all-powerful mother, open to idealization and blame" (1983, 170).[12] They argue that we are culturally encouraged to maintain maternal idealizations to so great an extent that the mother we cannot idealize is unacknowledged (Contratto 1983, 170); a world without mothers as we idealize them, Contratto adds, is a world of fear and pain (1983, 171). It is this sort of world that Butler makes us face in her Xenogenesis series.

Highlighting Lilith as the mother of all reminds us, too, that Lilith *is* a mother, according to legend. She's not our mother, but she did give birth to armies of Lucifer's young. Her children are demons, but they are her children nonetheless, a facet of the story often overlooked by critics (thereby supporting Contratto and Chodorow's observations). In fact, God's punishment of Lilith reflects her maternal status: she is to suffer

the loss of scores of children every day. I suggest that Mother Lilith, with all her imperfections, draws our attention to a different aspect of motherhood than that associated with Eve. Instead of birthing and nurturing children, Lilith causes us to consider the difficulties of loss or separation from them. Butler's Lilith is certainly aware of that pain in the novel. When the humans she educates leave for another earth habitat she asks, "But what about Me? I didn't hurt anyone. *Why am I still here?*" (Butler 1987, 259).

By endowing Lilith with characteristics traditionally associated with Eve, Butler revisions Lilith with an eye for the anxieties experienced by women and mothers of the twentieth century. In this revision, we are encouraged to reconcile women's self-love with altruism, female desire with motherhood. That Lilith is not perfect is crucial, for her imperfection enables her to appear human, unfit for idealized fantasies and expectations. Her character serves to expand our conceptions of women and mothers. In *Adulthood Rites*, Butler's sequel to *Dawn*, the author conspicuously juxtaposes the deviant aspects of Lilith with a maternal stance. A male character spies Lilith and thinks, "Lilith. Unusual name loaded with bad connotations. She should have changed it. Almost anything would have been better" (Butler 1988, 36). In the next moment, however, the same spectator watches Lilith breast feeding her son and classifies her as, "A mother. Very much a mother. And something else" (Butler 1988, 37). That "something else" is colored by the voyeur's attraction to Lilith; his next move is to inquire about her mate. The depiction of Butler's heroine as both maternal and sexual obscures those stereotypes that have plagued considerations of women since Eden.

The series of attributes and abilities that mark Butler's Lilith is indicative of the efforts of numerous feminist movements. As Tamar Frankiel notes in *The Voice of Sarah*, women of various ethnic groups—African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, as well as American Jews—are "offering their perspectives in their inherited wisdom to the effort of clarifying women's reflection on experience" (1990, 108). We witness a similar clarification and reflection in *Dawn*. It would be wrong to discuss Butler's Lilith with an eye only for the way a Hebrew legend shapes her, for Butler's rehabilitated heroine is informed by the writer's African American ancestry as well. As Hoda M. Zaki writes, Butler "brings to her fiction the experiences of being a black woman" (1990, 239). These experiences compliment Butler's revision of Lilith, and promote a heroine informed by cultural history.

While the fusion of a mythical figure with a historical one may seem to undermine revisionist history in its reliance on both fact and fiction, I suggest that from the perspective of the revisionary writer there is little distinction between history and myth. Mythical female figures such as Lilith manifest themselves in our cultural psyche, the effect being that

they are as "true" a part of our past as our foremothers. As Russ explains, "[Myths] are dramatic embodiments of what a culture believes to be true—or what it would like to be true—or what it is mortally afraid may be true" (1972, 4). In other words, while it was likely that no one ever spied an insatiable witch flying through the air, men's fears of powerful women are all too real. And those male fears influence women's behavior, regardless of their validity. Cixous and Clément discuss the issue of reality versus myth in *Newly Born Woman*, concluding that for a history to be "true," it must "pass through all the registers of the social structure" (1986, 6). These critics argue for a history created by women, "at once the same in the Real and . . . Imaginary" (1986, 6). In *Dawn*, Butler shows herself up to the task; she surveys her inherited mythological and historical pasts, recognizes them as influential in female development, and attempts to improve that development by recreating and revising women's history. The manifestations of African American female experience within *Dawn* are especially clear when considered in the light of black women's history as presented by Angela Davis.

Davis's article "Reflections of the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" is dedicated to debunking the image of black matriarch and slave collaborator. Butler's Lilith seems representative of the black matriarch, particularly in her negotiation for stability and survival in a foreign world. Davis argues that "matriarch" as applied to the black woman is a "cruel misnomer . . . because it implies stable kinship structures within which the mother exercises decisive authority" (1971, 5). Davis contests the word "matriarch" because of the constant state of instability and fear that shaped the black slave woman's experience. That Butler's Lilith sees herself as a slave to the Oankali is evident. We know, for example, that the Oankali are "always watching" Lilith's activities (Butler 1987, 96), and she thinks to herself that she "would not be permitted even the illusion of freedom" (1987, 56). The Oankali rely upon Lilith for genetic progress, similar to slave holders' economic reliance upon slaves. Davis also tells us that essential to the slave mothers' mission was a "studied indolence" (1971, 6), and a drive to betray their captors. The same is true of Butler's Lilith. A private goal in her parenting is to teach her fellow humans to "learn and run," a commitment reiterated throughout the novel (Butler 1987, 263). Lilith, while appearing to cooperate with her captors in the eyes of fellow humans, does what she can to undermine the Oankali and preserve her own people, just as her African American ancestors participated in the sabotage and destruction of their oppressors (Davis 1971, 9). A dire likeness shared by Lilith and the female black slave is the vulnerability of these women to sexual assaults; Butler's Lilith is violated so thoroughly that human sex is no longer a possibility for her. Lilith and the black slave mothers Davis describes could also expect to have their children appropriated by others.

I began my discussion of Butler's Lilith by naming her the "new Lilith," and I believe that she is; she is a Lilith indebted to the new relationships women themselves are forging. Butler invests her heroine with the myths and experiences of alien minorities: Jewish and African American women. And Butler is not alone in this practice. In her "Lilith Poems," Alicia Suskin Ostriker also depicts Lilith as an African American. Like the Lilith we meet in Moore and Butler's texts, Ostriker's Lilith is a woman of power whose purpose and abilities are misunderstood:

> He thinks me evil, he be
> Afraid of me and always desiring me
> Chasing my black behind and woolly black hair
> But it's you I'm after girl
> (Ostriker 1993, 96)

Ostriker's Lilith is both threatening and attractive to mankind. But it is the woman addressed in the poem with whom Lilith hopes to connect. She forges this connection through maternity, likening her experiences to the woman's own:

> . . . and you a mother
> Watching your children hurt one another
>
> I know
> How you feel, I bear a hundred
> Babies every day, and they die by nightfall
> . . .
> But every midnight I kiss
> Their dead faces
> (Ostriker 1993, 96)

The speaker does not persecute the woman, nor does she present herself as one who would hurt children. Ostriker's depiction of Lilith as a mother—and as a mother who experiences loss—echoes a side of Lilith seen in Butler's novel.[13] In the revisionary work of women writers, we repeatedly find the demonic Lilith replaced by one who knows and recognizes pain. This facet of Lilith's character prompts Ostriker to anticipate an alliance between Lilith and Eve. In the final moments of the poem, Lilith positions herself as ally to the woman: "I hug your body, girl, I breathe / *Have courage*" (Ostriker 1993, 96).[14] The Lilith informed by Jewish legend and African American women's experience symbolizes strength, union, and promise.

Though we find revisions of Lilith in numerous genres, the field S/F writers fictionalize is arguably responsible for the changing attitudes reflected in this work. The shift in women's attitudes toward mothering appears to be rooted in the industrialization and technological advances of our society; Contratto attributes the recent change in family dynamics to

women's involvement in industry during World War II (1983, 169). Active female participation in the historically masculine arenas of industry and technology debunks the fallacy that gender must define and confine women. The revisionist writings of female S/F authors highlight women's potential to thwart the historical limitations imposed upon female characters, and upon women themselves. The Liliths we meet in S/F works are not ideal as mothers, lovers, or alien others. Instead, they demonstrate women's ambition and ability to support others without sacrificing or disempowering themselves. These new myths move Lilith into a respected and essential category of female representations that is difficult to dismiss. The loss that characterizes this representation is perhaps a manifestation of the loss intrinsic to revisionary work; with the revisioned Lilith comes the displacement of the figures of idealized mother and titillating bitch goddess. Instead we meet a character who reflects women's experience in a way that "Cloudcuckoooland fantasies" of women cannot.[15] Thus, the myth of Lilith continues to indicate the history of the age in which it is given shape.[16] For the first time, however, Lilith depicts an era of women who are ambitious yet humane, independent yet social, and by and large, splendidly complex.

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Notes

1. I borrow this term from Russ, who applies it to her description of the feminine heroes we find in conventional stories. She notes that the Bitch Goddess "is not a person." See Russ (1972, 6).

2. The revisioning process to which I refer is the process of revising stories, histories, and legends from a feminist perspective. Adrienne Rich has labeled this enterprise "feminist revisioning" for it literally entails a "re-vision," an "act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." See Rich (1979, 35).

3. I rely here on Cantor's presentation of Lilith's tale. See also Koltuv (1986, 20); and Ginzberg (1967).

4. For images of these amulets, see Koltuv (1986, 78–90).

5. Cixous and Clément reference Michelet's text in their examinations of demonic women. See Cixous and Clément (1986, 3).

6. Lilith tries to explain this to Adam: "'Don't you understand, dear? God didn't send me. It was you, yourself, waiting and wanting me.'" Her repeated attempts to make Adam understand his part in her creation reminds us of man's part in inventing and perpetuating the myth of Lilith as a demonic enemy. See Moore (1975, 174).

7. Nehama Aschkenasy associates the characterization of Eve as a childish female with the midrashic stories of the ancient rabbis. See Aschkenasy (1986, 43).

8. For a brief discussion of Lilith as the antithesis of Eve, see Cantor (1983, 45).

9. Lilith considers Eve a "usurper" because she secures the female body Lilith had temporarily vacated. Supposedly God "had taken the flesh that [Lilith] had worn, and used it for His own purposes." See Moore (1975, 180).

10. See Koltuv (1986, 19).

11. For examples of women who both submit to and resist procreation in women's science fiction, see Russ (1977).

12. Contratto makes this claim in "Psychology Views Mothers and Mothering: 1897–1980," but also references an earlier study prepared with Chodorow. See Contratto (1983, 170).

13. Hadas's (1980, 1–19) poem cycle "The Passion of Lilith" also presents a Lilith who yearns for her children.

14. Such an alliance reflects feminist midrashic interpretations of the Lilith/Eve relationship. In Judith Plaskow's new midrash, Lilith and Eve "taught each other many things, and told each other stories, and laughed together, and cried over, and over, till the bond of sisterhood grew between them." See Plaskow (1992, 216).

15. I borrow this term from Russ (1972, 5).

16. In *Woman and the Demon*, Auerbach examines how the myth of the demonic woman reflects dominant cultural attitudes. Though she is specifically concerned with Victorian culture, her insight on myth as a reflection of social order is relevant beyond that period (1982, 10).

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